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AUTHOR Ecklund, Constance L.
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ABSTRACT

Teaching conversation will always pose a great challenge to the foreign language instructor. Even by the third year of language study, the typical time for this skill's development, students have neither the fluency nor the confidence necessary to speak easily. Also, since many are ill at ease in conversing in their native language, getting these students to participate in any verbal exchange can be a problem. In a one-year college French course, the use of videotape recording has brought marked improvement in students' willingness to speak and in the quality of their utterances. Students' televised parodies of the basic text at the end of the first term demonstrate newly-learned vocabulary and gestures. In the second term, videotape is used for intensive pronunciation remediation. Both techniques are adaptable to any level of language learning and encourage students to accept responsibility for their progress. (Author/MSE)

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PARODY AND PHONETICS: VIDEO IN THE CONVERSATION CLASS

Constance L. Ecklund[1]

Teaching conversation will always pose a great challenge to the instructor of a foreign language. Even by the third year of language study--the typical time for this particular skill's development--students have neither the fluency nor the confidence necessary to speak easily; and since many are ill-at-ease in conversing in their native tongue, getting these shy souls into any verbal exchange is a real problem. In a one-year college French course, the use of video has brought marked improvement both in the willingness to speak and in the quality of the utterance. Students' televised parodies of the basic text bring the first term to a close with a unique demonstration of newly learned vocabulary and gestures; while video-tape correction places the emphasis on intensive pronunciation remediation in the second term. Both techniques are adaptable to any level of language learning and have the advantage of creating a readily accepted sense of responsibility for progress within the student.

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In a one-year conversation course many methods are effective in having students make the great leap forward in vocabulary that will allow them to begin at last to achieve a fluency in foreign language. The purpose of this paper is not to review the usual techniques in such vocabulary accrual, but rather to show how video can add a special excitement and bring a different impetus to foreign language speaking and to acquiring a good foreign accent.

By the first term of a third-year course almost all of our foreign language students have had experience before the television camera. From their first semester they have been involved in simple skits that offer them the appealing visual proof of recently gained communication skills. These skits are usually humorous, since comedic "acting-up" is a natural reaction when one has to appear on camera, as well as the usual way timid students mask their apprehension.

There are, however, several less attractive tendencies in video-taping which elementary courses often point up: the use of television as a "filler" for slow days in the classroom or language lab; skits with so little structure other than a suggested topic that the resultant poles of excessive high jinks or desperate stage fright negate most positive learning; poor delineation of the *raison d'être* for taping and its subsequent appearance in the course as extraneous amusement.

It is, thus, certainly a challenge in a third-year course, when classes are composed of so many majors and minors in the foreign language, to capitalize on the entertainment value of video-taping while making a conscious effort to join the fun to a solid learning structure. At Southern Connecticut State University a one-year conversation/phonetics course was chosen as a good base for developing this integrated approach. The techniques discussed below involve a model of two parts: term one--travel French with simplified pronunciation practice; term two--French in discussion and debate with technical phonetic analysis.

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1. Constance L. Ecklund, Ph.D., Yale University, is Professor of French at Southern Connecticut State University. She has published on 19th century French literature as well as on language teaching techniques, and is currently writing a book on 19th century French theatre begun under the auspices of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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However, since it is conceivable that the two terms could be reversed in order or their content compressed into a simplified one-term format, it is important to bear in mind that the video techniques we have devised for a specific model have wide applicability whenever speaking or pronunciation skills are being taught. Another point of flexibility in interpreting these methods is the language laboratory. Our program does not use an elaborate room; and because portable television cameras are good performers even with less than "studio" conditions, a classroom with shades up, lights on, and equipment set between window and student can do almost as well as our improvised lab studio. What must be avoided is the distraction of having the instructor present or other students looking on.

In order to use as much of the new vocabulary and linguistic patterns of conversation's first-semester text, *Vivre en France* by Fernand Marty (Larousse and Co., NY, 1975)--the type of book which stresses everyday, realistic situations of a young tourist in France--the class periods are regularly devoted to improvised acting-out of the day's assignment. These improvisations are not humorous, except as mistakes or lapses make them so; they are not televised, and correction is made during class by means of correction sheets kept by the instructor and later handed back to the students. The entire semester in the classroom builds toward the students' ability in assimilating a large vocabulary, many French gestures, and a certain ease in their production. Correct French accent is always important, but the major goal is, as any conversation teacher knows, "getting them to say something".

Since their earlier semesters have introduced the students to demonstration or even partial testing of their degree of success by video skits, they are prepared for going before the lab's video camera again. But this semester is different. In an effort to make each student return closely to the text in reviewing the term's material, we have made their conversation video assignment more sophisticated than, for example, a funny scene in a *boulangerie*, the script of which is of pure student invention. Inspired by the success of a third-year civilization course, in which students chose of their own accord a caricatural orientation when requested for a video final to create costumed interpretations of famous literary or historic figures (see Figures 1 and 2)[2], the conversation video tape makes satire the tool for precise re-definition of the term's learning. Now, as a carefully scheduled part of their final examination, conversation students are required to parody specific incidents and characters from their textbook, with the most highly rated tapes being those which include the most linguistic and gestural material in the most original textual satire (see Figure 3).

Why satire? Because although students are always able to write a skit, the quality of a totally "home-made" effort can vary enormously. When the assignment is the parody of already existent ideas, and when the ideas come from the traditional whipping-boy--the course text--there is a higher level of performance and a greater rigor in textual assimilation. This is not an assignment in copying or copyright infringement, but rather the opportunity to do what every student is tempted to do: take out frustration or ventilate derision publicly by drawing on youthful iconoclasm and independence. Yet it is rebellion within a positive framework of hard work and learning. The student must review well all previously presented material in order to change it around into his or her own context. If the textual dialogues and discussions have been dull, or the "hero" or "heroine" lifeless, here is the chance to turn that vapidity into a sparkle that counts toward a grade. If, on the other hand, the text has been full of life and personality--the case most of the time with *Vivre en France*--students have become so familiar with the personal idiosyncracies of the textual cast of characters that it is easy to caricature them in new versions of text episodes.

The students are encouraged to supplement their parodies with costumes, simple props, and a title that will be the opening frame for their taping. Some wish to have a snatch of introductory music. Video-taping then begins by the Lab Director in the small language laboratory studio.[3] The ideal is to have an even number of students so that

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2. Photographs by Robert Corda, Assistant Audio-Visual Director, Southern Connecticut State University; and Peter Wiese, University Language Lab Director.

3. See "French Accent through Video Analysis" by Constance L. Ecklund and Peter Wiese (*Foreign Language Annals* 14(1), 1981), for a complete discussion of cost, space, and equipment, as well as details of phonetic remediation through video.

Figure 1. "Madame Bovary" shares a confidence.

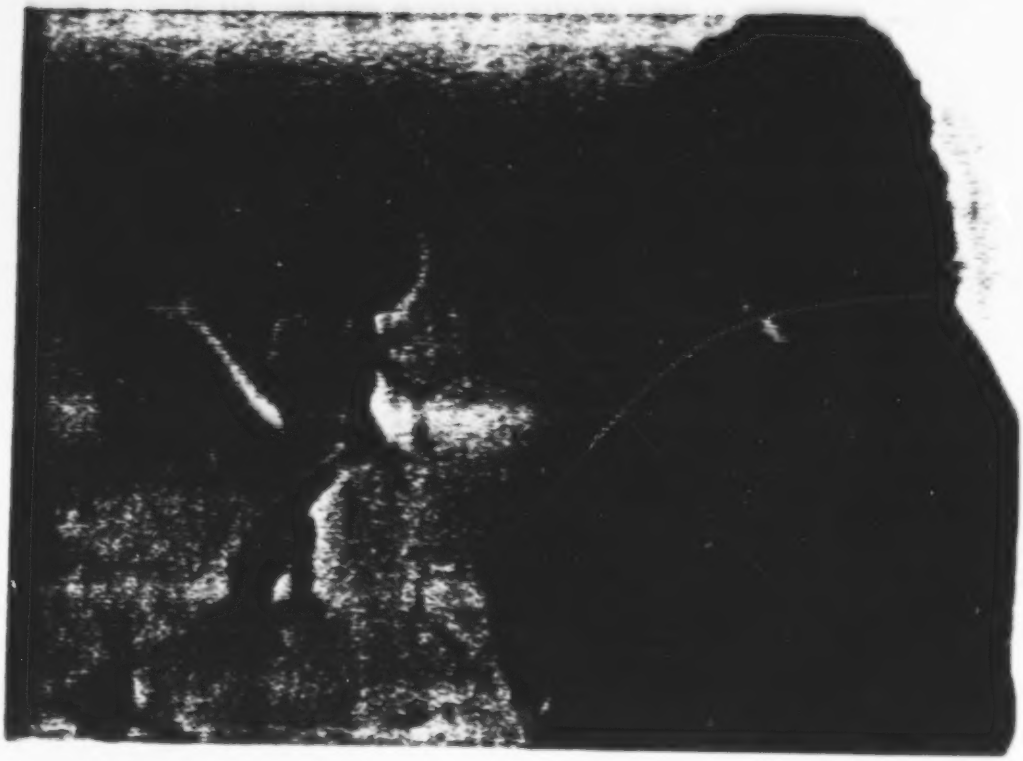

Figure 2. "Monet" and his favorite model.

Figure 3. "A close encounter of the hotel kind: tourist and bellboy".

each parody will involve a duo. If three students are participating in a performance, they must be told in advance to give each person an equal role. We always allow one to two hours' rehearsal time before the final taping session. This accustoms the students to the need for speaking loudly and clearly (they wear clip-on microphones, but the desk model or hand held systems are feasible) and for keeping their heads up. No note reading is allowed, and students are urged to lean on improvisation--after all, this *is* conversation--rather than memorization.

The final tape is viewed by the class on the last day of the course. The delight is enormous when more than one duo has chosen similar incidents or characters to re-interpret. Students now *see* what every language teacher knows: that one learns in a classroom vocabulary and idiom, gesture and accent, only to have always to rework them when confronted with actual life situations. It is a banality, but one whose importance is often overlooked by students. By being forced to a deconstruction of a specific language grid and characterization that are then re-shaped in a new visual mold, students find their learning tool--the textbook--has been made by them often its detractors, and now its new "authors", into a living, exuberant, unforgettable creation. As for the instructor, this video record--an enormous help in final assessment of speech and accent--is now also an unusually effective means of "seeing" the course textbook in new ways. The text, now re-created, grows in depth and possibilities for future presentation through the video cassette's lively demonstration of its many guises. Parodic deflation and comic invention have thus served student and teacher in a creative way, with the video process playing its key role along with the actors.

In the second term of the conversation course the students are quite relaxed about speaking in everyday situations. Nevertheless, they still are guilty, perhaps not now of silence, but instead of poorly pronounced sounds. It is time to work hard on mouth and muscle function, and once again, the lab video-cassette tape proves to be the effective tool.

At the first lab, students are asked to read a short passage without any previous preparation as well as either to read the French alphabet or the French vowels. This tape, a good sound production profile, is analyzed by the instructor in front of the students during the next lab. As the student "Americanizes" a particular sound, for the example the vowel /i/ or the consonant /N/, the instructor "freezes" the video image on the screen by pressing the "Pause" button. Standing next to the screen, the instructor then can produce the sound correctly, and the students are all readily able to see the mouth shapes of both correct and incorrect utterance. This demonstration is always a rapid initiation to the problems as well as a striking corrective. Students, holding mirrors, can at once see whether their mouth shape approximates the correct or incorrect version.

In every laboratory period during the rest of the semester video-cassette work forms the nucleus of the 50-minute segment. Every other week the students, either singly or in two's, are asked to perform various exercises in front of the television camera. They may have to read a prepared prose or poetic text, or to recite a memorized passage. They may have a dramatic assignment: duplicating a news program, a weather forecast, a talk-show, or a commercial. If any notes are used they must be in the form of cue cards so that the student's head is always up, his eyes looking toward the camera.

An effective variation when students are taping a recitation or reading is to have a separate tape of the instructor or native speaker reading or reciting the same passage. Students may view this tape before beginning their own work, or it can be shown before the replay of the student tapes. We have found that this is an excellent tool for training non-natives in the unique shapes of the French mouth. Seeing a role model seems to be much more effective than merely hearing a tape over earphones.

These "performance" labs are filmed either by the Lab Director or by the students themselves (Figure 4). It is stressed that no props are needed-- except, perhaps, for commercials--but that the aim be as correct a pronunciation as possible. A zoom lens allows closeups of the face without distraction (Figure 5), and since the student is positioned behind a lectern or on a high stool there is little hazard of body movement. It is essential that quality not

Figure 4. Filming in progress.

Figure 5. A closeup shot.

Figure 6. Single frame for analysis.

quantity of performance time be the key factor. These video cassettes are, after all, prescriptive, and each student must concentrate on the speaking effort--not the dramatic content. Certainly intonation, studied carefully in class, is vital in learning an authentic French, but the technique of video remediation works best with sound formation.

In alternate laboratory periods all students and instructor gather around the video playback equipment. It is important that the time for each individual taping has been kept short; excessively lengthy performances will make in-lab group correction tedious instead of telling. Each student's speech sequence is now reviewed. Of course, the optimum review has been preceded by a preparatory preview by the instructor; such a preliminary tape preview should have been initiated with the counter on zero so that it has been possible to jot down the numbers indicating where on the tape individual student problems occur. This is indispensable if one wishes now during the lab playback session to repeat a certain segment without excessive delay.

Once in lab before the class one or more of the following techniques works well; the instructor can:

1. "freeze" the incorrect sound on the screen and discuss with pointer and fingers the reason for the mistake (Figure 6).
2. use a slow motion or still frame advance to demonstrate the mistake from initial malformation to final incorrect utterance. (This is very effective in vowel sounds; the students are always impressed by watching as well as hearing an American dipthong in the making, inexorably deforming and finally devouring the purity of the French vowel like a voracious Pac-Man.)
3. "freeze" the incorrect sound while giving a correct demonstration next to the screen, preferably seated at screen height.
4. request that students themselves take the instructor's role in #1 or #3.

Although none of the procedures outlined above can insure that each student will lose totally his American accent, such use of tape for sound correction does lead to surprisingly positive results, especially, it is good to say, among the weaker students. Having acquired a strongly reinforced visual and aural image of sounds, students know what is needed to improve. In class when they listen to each other, they in turn watch each other, aware that good French sounds are seen as well as heard.

As is the case in the first term, a video component is built into the final examination process. We usually schedule this taping for the next to the last week of class. Ten minutes before a pre-arranged taping time, each student is given a reading passage to prepare; a selection containing some dialogue is a good way to test intonation pattern as well as sound production. Always included is a part of the initial lab assignment, taped more than three months earlier. After the tape has been completed, the instructor can use the week to grade each student, noting improvements and continued difficulties.

During the final lab session of the term the tape is shown to the class, with each "performance" followed by brief discussion and comment. Students are always eager now to have a look at their initial profile tape in order to hear and see what they hope will be their marked progress. This could be the time for awarding prizes for excellence and improvement; but even without a tangible reward the comparison of tapes does not fail to elicit a chorus of cheers for advancement and groans at what obviously remains still to be done.

The power of learning a language through television is immense, yet most of the time the student learner is either passively watching a foreign language program or simply using video as an ego-building adjunct to a traditional language course. These approaches have their merits, but there is no need to stop with them. The conversation course that we have just described uses video techniques that bring progress in language fluency and accent while making the student the active, creative participant in that progress. In a very real way televised textual restructuring and phonetic remediation turn the student into an artist--in one instance, the author of words, in the

other, the sculptor of sounds. Those *bêtes-noires*--the language laboratory and the final examination--become positive tools, providing symbols of the students' own creation. Neither video phonetics nor video parody requires the other to be successful; a course could emphasize one without the other being its prerequisite. Both give the student major responsibility in perfecting that elusive ability to speak in a foreign tongue. In one method it is the student who must deconstruct native-level prose in order to construct his own linguistic expression; in the other, it is the student who must deconstruct his own sounds in order to recreate a phonic structure comprehensible to a native.

The exciting and lasting dimension of both methods will soon be continued outside the language lab or classroom video studio. With home playback capabilities becoming more and more common, it is envisaged that soon our students can have copies of their class tapes for private study. The initial phonetic profile tape and its content retaped at course's end to show progress, will become part of a student's home practice; and the conversation parodies will, it is hoped, be replayed with the same pleasure but with more academic benefit than tapes of commercial feature films. We especially look forward to the time in the near future when each of our student's college video productions can be part of a personalized home tape, a visual proof of foreign language assimilation, a visual reminder of foreign language enjoyment.